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## **Being strategic in partnership – interpreting local knowledge of modern local government**

### **Abstract**

A broad and international literature exists on networked governance which has both described and informed recent transformations in local government. Reforms in the UK have led to the development of strategic partnerships to join-up services and solve wicked issues. In Scotland these are referred to as Community Planning Partnerships. Evidence from numerous studies has highlighted the partial nature of this transformation, particularly around community engagement, with some of the pioneers of this work now questioning earlier assumptions. This article presents an interpretive policy analysis of strategic partnership in Scotland to add three themes to this literature. Firstly, to demonstrate the historical contingency of “joined-up government”; secondly to explore the practices and meanings used by policy actors to understand “strategic” and “partnerships”. Finally the article problematises strategic partnership working suggesting that in and of itself it creates effective barriers to community empowerment and even engagement.

**Keywords:** partnership, management, community engagement, local government, Scotland

## **Introduction**

It is now commonplace to describe local government as a “networked polity” undertaking governance (Durose, 2009; Rhodes, 1997). In the UK successive reforms dating back to the 1980s have fragmented institutions of government and introduced new forms of accountability and relationships with other bodies. These changes manifested themselves in the growth of partnership government – firstly with area-based partnerships to tackle the “wicked issues” in neighbourhoods, such as New Deal for Communities and Social Inclusion Partnerships (Johnstone & McWilliams, 2005; Lawless, 2004) and latterly across a local authority area through larger strategic partnerships, Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) and Community Planning Partnerships (Cowell, 2004; Matthews, 2012a; Skelcher, 2000; Sullivan, 2007). While these partnerships proliferated in the UK, global reforms to local governance are producing similar place-based and public service partnerships (Dekker & Van Kempen, 2004; Dekker & Van Kempen, 2008; Stoker, 2011; Wagenaar, 2007)

These partnerships were meant to break down the barriers between different public sector organisations and prioritise action based on a strategy agreed with the community (Lloyd & Illsley, 2001; Sinclair, 2008; Sullivan, 2007). Whereas reforms introduced by the coalition government in England since 2010

have officially removed the requirement for local authorities to lead LSPs in England, in Scotland the similar process of Community Planning is being further embedded and growing in importance (Scottish Government, 2007b). A series of reports and consultation documents by the Scottish Government have increased the role of Community Planning in coordinating, delivering and reforming local services, reinforcing the centrality of strategic partnership working in local governance.

This article focuses on the categories of “strategic” and “strategic partnership working” as a political and management practice and seeks to problematise it. The majority of the literature focusing on partnership working within local government and urban studies, while recognising these developments as part of the New Public Management, predominantly focus on the political novelty of partnership working and local governance (Skelcher, 2000; Sullivan, 2007). This paper uses the methodology of interpretive policy analysis to focus on how the officers and politicians who implement strategic partnership working on a daily basis as an organisational management practice – emphatically not a political practice – gain meaning from the term “strategic” and in turn reconstruct it in the practices of partnership working. The rise of corporate management and government in the 1960s and 1970s is first presented to explain some of the historic contingency behind strategic partnership working. The

meanings and practices of strategic work in two Scottish local authorities are then presented. This suggests that in doing “strategy”, officers and politicians create a strategic cultural domain (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) quite different from the lived experience of the community they are meant to be engaging with. It is demonstrated that this effectively undermines the partnership work they are meant to deliver.

### **Partnership, governance and accountability**

This paper engages with the literature on two distinct reform agendas within local government: the development of the New Public Management (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994) and the development of partnership working as the key way to deliver policy in a networked polity (Rhodes, 1997). As part of the general restructuring of the state over the past thirty years the two issues are closely linked, for example, partnership governance is seen as a way to drive the efficiency measures that are the object of New Public Management.

The need for collaboration between different government actors and wider stakeholders is not new and exchange theory and resource dependency theory in the 1960s and 1970s provided early arguments for forming partnerships (Sullivan & Lowndes, 2004). Partnerships are commonly conceived as a way to deliver joined-up working to tackle complex ‘wicked issues’ (6, 1997). There has been concern, dating back at least to the

“urban problem” of the late 1960s, with the need to tackle problems of deprivation in a cross-cutting way culminating in regular policy initiatives (Atkinson & Moon, 1994). The New Labour UK government from 1997, and the Labour dominated coalitions in devolved governments in Scotland and Wales after 1998, developed a proliferation of such partnerships (Johnstone & McWilliams, 2005; Sullivan, 2003), leading Skelcher to characterise the state as becoming increasingly “congested” (2000). Reforms introducing Local Strategic Partnerships in England and placing a statutory duty on Scottish local authorities to form Community Planning Partnerships could be characterised as a “decongestant” – joining diffuse partnerships and partner organisations to tackle strategic issues (Hastings, 2003; Matthews, 2010; Scottish Executive, 2002; Social Exclusion Unit, 2001; Sullivan & Lowndes, 2004).

In a comparative review of local government reform Stoker (2011) identified networked community governance as an international phenomenon that ‘sets as its over-arching goal the meeting of community needs as defined by the community, within the context of the demands of a complex system of multi-level governance.’ (Stoker, 2011: 17). The literature on these reforms has highlighted both the inherent contradictions between the aims of many of these initiatives, and the problems that emerged in implementation. With the dual and conflicting agendas of New Public Management and communitarianism

leading to partnership working, a key challenge has been delivering community engagement within high-level partnerships. As Sullivan and Lowndes (2004: 63) suggest '[a] partnership whose strength is to bring together diverse agencies and interests may struggle to establish a clear and common identity, recognisable to sceptical, or uninterested, local citizens. This is likely to be a particular problem for strategic partnerships (like LSPs) given their wide ranging remit and responsibilities.'

Research on LSPs in England showed they were dominated by managers and that 'fewer democratic governance obligations tend to be imposed on partnerships than apply to the organisations of representative government' (Munro, Roberts et al., 2008: 63). While engaging communities in these partnerships was meant to deliver accountability, the success of this has been regularly wanting (Davies, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). For partnerships engaging in deprived neighbourhoods a further contradiction was the community were often presented as deficient (Alcock, 2004; Imrie & Raco, 2003). While community partnerships were to be used to improve service delivery, they also aimed to develop community capacity and increase the "bridging" social capital of communities otherwise seen as deficient (Kearns, 2003).

This gap between the academic theorising, policy rhetoric and the reality of a community that is signally *not* engaged in civic life has led to something of a *mea culpa* by Rhodes on networked governance (Rhodes, 2011). As Stoker suggests in the same journal issue:

‘One key issue with community governance as a societal role for local government is that it has far less support from citizens or organized interests within society. It is one of those ideas appealing to academics discovering a new paradigm – as exemplified by the governance perspective promoted by Rhodes and Stoker – but it is very difficult to embed in popular culture understandings of how societies are governed.’

(Stoker, 2011: 28)

While policy-makers have been keen to bring communities into partnership working, communities want services delivered by institutions they are comfortable working with and engagement on their terms (Matthews, 2012a). Policy-makers within bureaucracies still recreate hierarchies in their practices and the degree of devolution to networks can be easily over-emphasised (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006; Rhodes, 2011).

### ***Community planning in Scotland***

The first pathfinder Community Planning Partnerships were established in five Scottish local authorities in 1998 (Rogers,

Smith et al., 2000). Most local authorities had setup

Community Planning Partnerships by 2001 and the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 made it a statutory duty:

“of a local authority to initiate and, having done so, to maintain and facilitate a process (in this Act, called “community planning”) by which the public services provided in the area of the local authority are provided and the planning of that provision takes place—

(a)after consultation—

(i)among all the public bodies (including the local authority) responsible for providing those services; and

(ii)with such community bodies and other bodies or persons as is appropriate; and

(b)after and by way of such co-operation among those bodies and persons as is appropriate.” (Scottish Parliament, 2003)

Whereas in England the coalition government since 2010 has lessened the role of Local Strategic Partnerships in delivering services, in Scotland the role of CPPs continues to strengthen.

The UK Coalition took the view that LSPs were part of the state structure that dampened the civic entrepreneurialism that the Big Society and Localism would unleash (Communities and Local Government, 2010). The Scottish Government of 2007-11 introduced reforms which made CPPs accountable for the



delivery of services through Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs), agreed between the CPP and the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2007a; 2007b). SOAs are aligned to a National Performance Framework (NPF) with 16 national outcomes to be met by 2017. The pressures of financial austerity in Scotland due to falling revenue from the block grant from the UK Government has also intensified the push for further integration and partnership working (Beveridge, McIntosh et al., 2010). The Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (the “Christie Commission”) setup by the Scottish Government to inform future policy making, which published its report in June 2011, particularly emphasised the role of Community Planning in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of services, concluding that:

‘The Commission recommends public service organisations should work to *extend and deepen* a local partnership approach, building on, but going well beyond the current community planning partnership model. In particular, there should be a much stronger focus on engaging with people and communities in partnership processes, including the design and development of a pattern of integrated service provision.’

(Christie, 2011: 45; emphasis added)

This view was reiterated by the Minister for Local Government in the announcement of a review of Community Planning in 2012:

“Parts of the current community planning framework need strengthening. It must deliver better outcomes, greater integration of public services at a local level, greater consistency in local integration and clearer accountability for partners.” (Scottish Government, 2012b)

In Scotland, strategic partnerships are continuing and their role in integrating local service delivery is being enhanced, providing efficiencies and engaging communities.

This marks a clear difference from England, where localism England has removed LSPs, or lessened their role. The proposed Community and Empowerment and Renewal legislation will further enhance the role of CPPs in community engagement (Scottish Government, 2012a). Given the challenges to date in engaging communities in the networked governance, we have to question whether this will be successful. By focusing on community planning as a strategic management organisational practice, the rest of this paper further questions whether such partnership activities can deliver community engagement and empowerment.

## **Methodology**

The fieldwork for this study took place in two local authorities, the City of Edinburgh and Renfrewshire, in Scotland in 2007-8. The political and ethical sensitivities of the data mean the authorities will be referred to simply as local authorities One and Two. The fieldwork comprised of observing, as an overt non-participant (Gans, 1976), 24 meetings or training sessions associated with strategic partnership working. During this period both local authorities were implementing new local partnerships, replacing previous community regeneration partnerships that had been focused on the least affluent neighbourhoods. The meetings observed were therefore both those at the most strategic level, incorporating senior executives of local public sector organisations, and emerging local partnerships. Notes were taken during the meetings and written up shortly after attendance. This data was supplemented by interviews with 19 senior or middle-ranking officers and councillors. They ranged from street level bureaucrats making everyday decisions on policy and resource distribution (Durose, 2009; Lipsky, 1980) to those higher in organisational hierarchies who, institutionally, would set strategic direction and represent organisations at partnership meetings. The interviews were loosely structured using the narrative interview technique (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). This allowed the free association between participants' narratives and the topics

being discussed. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded alongside the field notes.

The overall methodology was interpretive policy analysis (Yanow, 2000; 2007). The aim was to access the local knowledge of officers used in the everyday practice of delivering strategic partnership working (Yanow, 2003). The interpretive methodology led to an ethnographic approach to data analysis focusing on linguistic patterns within the dataset – metaphor, synecdoche, or other tropes used regularly (Yanow, 2000). These were considered along with observational data and organisational objects such as reports and even the marketing ephemera given away for the launch of new policy (Matthews, 2012a; Yanow, 1996). The data was analysed to inductively ascertain cultural “domains” – internally cohesive categories of policy as a cultural practice (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Shore & Wright, 1997). In this article a thick description (Geertz, 1993) of the “strategic domain” is presented. Cultural domains are theorised as hermeneutic – they are both constitutive of, and constituted by, the language and practices of the actors who use them. The thick description presents the historical contingency of the strategic domain (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006) and then goes on to present some of the constitutive parts of the domain before demonstrating how these were employed and reconstituted in practice.

## **The historical contingency of “strategic” working**

Strategic partnership working has extensive historical antecedents. However, it is often portrayed within both policy analysis and policy itself as novel – we are doing this because it has either not been done, or has failed, before. For example, the narrative in contemporary Scotland is that closer collaboration will reduce duplication and waste and deliver cross-cutting early-intervention measures to prevent excessive government expenditure (Beveridge, McIntosh et al., 2010; Christie, 2011). This is the latest in a series of narratives used to justify strategic partnership working, or similar forebears. To understand more fully the context of the strategic domain it is important to understand this historical contingency, particularly through successive reforms of Scottish government and governance. This provides a historic context and nuance and presents community planning as the latest twist in an on-going story (Jacobs & Manzi, 2012; Pollitt, 2008).

The focus of this research was the delivery of urban regeneration policy, where much of the partnership working to tackle wicked issues, targeting certain deprived neighbourhoods, was pioneered and many continuities persist (Atkinson & Moon, 1994; Sullivan, Barnes et al., 2006).

Previous research has demonstrated the discursive tradition in Scotland over 25 years of policy problem construction altered

very little. Policy documents used pathological discourses blaming deprived communities for the problems they suffered, while the genre of policy language altered with political changes (Hastings, 2000; 2003; Matthews, 2010).

The continuity of problem definition was paralleled by similar continuity in policy solution – that is, modern strategic partnership would solve the joined-up problems of these communities. The earliest policy initiative found during this research was a product of the ‘management revolution’ of local government in the UK in 1960s, where the corporate, problem-solving approaches pioneered in private industry were taken up with fervour by the public sector (Cockburn, 1977). This led to the many committees and reports restructuring local government – for example, the Redcliffe-Maud Commission on local government in England, the Planning Advisory Group of regional land-use planning and the Seebohm report on social work. The latter report, along with the Skeffington report into participation in the land-use planning system, led to a focus on community development and participation within this corporatism (Damer & Hague, 1971).

The Wheatley report on local government in Scotland recommended similar reforms in 1969 (Wightman, 2011). The new tier-two local authorities implemented corporate management and the new Regional Councils were required to

complete Regional Reports outlining how they were coordinating action between their own departments, the local NHS board and District Council within their area (Lloyd & Illsley, 1999). In 1975 the newly created Lothian Regional Council including Edinburgh, a product of these reforms, began to apply the corporate approach to the difficult problem of deprived neighbourhoods within the city. The Social and Community Development Programme was described in the fervent prose of the local newspaper thus:

‘Their objective: To try to use the total resources of local government to get to grips with the severe problems in certain areas of the city, such as housing, education, social work and recreation.’

As well as decentralising the more personal services, they are aiming to introduce a *corporate management approach*, with corporation officials and the residents working together on the decision-making.’

(*Edinburgh Evening News*, 6 January 1975,  
emphasis added)

Similarly, in Strathclyde Region, covering Renfrewshire, a decade later the authority developed a programme of Area Initiatives with intensive partnership working between the different tiers of local government and the local community to

give the community more say in improving services in the area and 'to develop a corporate *attack* on deprivation' (Strathclyde Regional Council, 1988: emphasis added). In these early cases corporate working could be discursively used as a logical solution to the problems of deprivation – the ability of corporate management to successfully evidence and define problems and then bring together an entire organisation to attack the problem. However, '[f]or all its promise of tougher control of resources, more penetrating analysis of social and economic problems and co-ordinated policies to solve them, it was beyond the powers of the new corporate management system...to arrest the deterioration of local people's circumstances.' (Cockburn, 1977: 96).

This "corporate" approach developed as the managerialist discourse changed in government. By the late 1980s this corporatism had become strategic management. Reforms to policies on urban regeneration and the UK Government Scottish Office Urban Aid funding, led to *New Life for Urban Scotland* published in 1988 and promising a more strategic approach to delivering urban regeneration in four partnership areas (McCrone, 1991; Scottish Office, 1988). Again, as with the description of corporate management in the 1970s, the emphasis was on joint working between public services, the community, and within the politics of the late 1980s, with the local private sector (Collins, 1999; Hastings, 2000). In the



policy texts around *New Life* we see the further development of the discourse and practice of corporate or strategic management in the institutions of governance in Scotland. By 1991 this has become the “Scottish approach” and writing for an academic audience the Chief Economic Adviser to the Secretary of State for Scotland, Gavin McCrone (1991) explains the pioneering *New Life* policy, concluding:

‘The Scottish approach, as described in this paper, has been one of evolution in the face of problems which are at least as severe as any found elsewhere in the UK ... But enough has been achieved, most visibly in the case of Glasgow, to give one some confidence that, given the right amount of commitment, the problems can be overcome.’

(McCrone, 1991: 937)

As partnership working went through successive iterations in the 1990s, by 2002 the then devolved Scottish government in its policy document *Better Communities in Scotland: Closing the Gap* (Scottish Executive, 2002) could confidently assert that:

*‘There is a long history of partnership working in Scotland. Partnerships help people get together to set joint priorities and targets and to develop and deliver joint solutions. At their most effective, they*

can help public-sector agencies work together more effectively, co-ordinating resources and streamlining services, so that poverty and injustice can be tackled as effectively as possible.’

(Scottish Executive, 2002: 16, emphasis added)

This policy document, allied with the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, provided the framework for strategic partnership working as a discourse and practice within Scottish local government. This continued with the development of Single Outcome Agreement (SOA), between the CPP and the Government (Scottish Government, 2007a; 2007b). The Chief Executive of local authority One, in presenting their first SOA to their strategic CPP board, used his extensive experience of local government to reflect on these new policy documents. Compared to the previous corporate approach of the Regional Reports, they described the SOA as something very different which would develop new ways of delivering partnership working, concluding that “this will matter if we get it right it will be really powerful”.

### **Being strategic in work**

This institutional narrative of strategic management underpinned the everyday practice of strategic partnership working. Strategic management through community planning was driven by the same logic of the corporate approach – this

was easy and would solve problems, it had to as this is what strategic management does. Indeed, one officer described it as a ‘no-brainer’:

‘the initial brief idea kinda idea behind Community Planning Community Planning’s kinda like a no-brainer it’s like the public sector has to work together and it has to work together more effectively for the benefit not of itself but of the people it serves and it’s like this is a genius idea who came up with it I mean it’s so obvious it’s not true’.

(Strategic officer, local authority One)

This strategic action is taking place in an ever-changing context which makes this ‘no-brainer’ action complex (Sullivan, 2003). For example, the wide changes to Scottish local government from 2007 affected the implementation context – the Scottish budget for 2007-10 froze local taxation rates and substantially altered the relationship between central and local government through ending the ring-fencing of grants; the main grant that had previously been directed to CPPs, the Community Regeneration Fund, was replaced by a new fund, the Fairer Scotland Fund (Scottish Government, 2007b). Policies were regularly changing giving Community Planning partners different priorities and making the seemingly simple action of

strategic management through community planning complex  
(Sinclair, 2008).

To apply logic to this messiness, the strategic act of community planning became – in organisational objects such as policy documents – a *planning* act to achieve defined ends, not an ongoing, cyclical, deliberative process. In strategic plans, a Community Plan or Single Outcome Agreement, various linguistic and spatial constructs were used in this planning act to create meaning out of “strategic” working: metaphor, spatial scale and discourse genre. Firstly, strategic and strategy are metaphors, deriving from Greek *strategos* meaning a leader of an army. In English, the object of the metaphor of STRATEGIC was a military term meaning a planned attack, as opposed to tactical aggression responding to enemy attacks. It is then applied to the subject of modern management to become a generative metaphor producing the social action of strategic management (Schön, 1979). One NHS officer in local authority One inadvertently returned to this military root of STRATEGY when they dismissed the ‘scatter-gun approach’ of tackling individual problems as they arose, preferring ‘to think about what we can add as a group ... adding value by coming together’. Here, the tactical approach of tackling problems when they occur is discounted in favour of strategic joint-working. In linguistic practices such as these STRATEGIC as metaphor became a key way to frame understandings of the

process of Community Planning as a linear policy process with achievable ends.

Secondly, strategic was a spatial scale. As the logic of strategic encompasses many and varied partners, the problems meant to be tackled through community planning grow. Thus, in the Community Plan of local authority two, 'Six Strategic Aims'<sup>1</sup> were listed concluding that:

'The aims are truly 'cross cutting' in that they have an impact on, and must be addressed through, everything that the partners do.'

Community Planning now becomes an all-encompassing policy initiative that must achieve everything and impact on everything (Cowell, 2004). The original subject of the STRATEGY metaphor – a general guiding the scarce resources to where they can be most effective – has been lost as the concept is stretched to cover a policy act that is meant to solve all the challenges that the area is facing.

It was not altogether clear why these community plans were so ambitious. National-level definitions of Community Planning, including the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, define

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<sup>1</sup> For information, these are 'Sustainable development', 'Listening to communities', 'Social justice', 'Economic prosperity', 'Equality of opportunity' and 'Social responsibility and citizenship'

the process as a modest one ‘to identify and solve local problems’ (Audit Scotland, 2006: 2). However, these statutory agencies are operating within a context where many ‘local’ problems are defined by Scottish government policy ambitions. For example, the present Scottish Government has the strategic objectives of creating a wealthier and fairer, smarter, healthier, safer and stronger, and greener Scotland. Community plans had to be ambitious to meet these objectives even though many officers were aware that the over-ambitious nature of the plans made them hard to implement and *not* strategic.

This messiness and complexity produced by stretching strategic in these plans meant they could only be delivered through joint-working between statutory agencies. It is easier to join-up local authority-wide services at a local authority level and so “strategic”, secondly, became a spatial concept, a ‘*strategic level*’. This notion of a strategic spatial level was used by officers to understand what they do, as shown by this officer defining strategic using an antithesis:

‘what’s not strategic what’s not strategic is I think the sort of quite a lot of the SIP previously PPA arrangements<sup>2</sup> where everybody sits down and tries to find their own solution to issues pertaining to their immediate environment with no reference to

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<sup>2</sup> the interviewee is referring to previous regeneration partnership structures and policies.

the fact that there's somebody else two miles away trying to do the same thing and somebody else along there trying to do the same thing. And in the majority of cases, not in one hundred per cent, but in the majority of cases the issues are common issues are around poverty and its effects around the quality and accessibility of services and around opportunity and so on. And it just doesn't what's not strategic is for you know lots of folk to be trying to do that in isolation'.

(Strategic officer, local authority Two)

This tension between local priorities and strategic targets was explicitly explored in one of the Community Plans discussing the feedback they had received from consultation exercises:

'Some of the feedback we received was about *very specific issues or areas* and it has not been possible to incorporate these into a *strategic* document such as the Community Plan.'

(Renfrewshire Council, 2001: 3, emphasis added)

This was also reflected in the structures of the CPPs. Those partnerships, including the CPP board, which operated at an authority-wide level, were seen as "strategic" as they were in this space. Locality-based partnerships were 'local' or

implementing bodies. One officer in local authority Two regularly described local Neighbourhood Partnerships as ‘delivery arms’ of the central, strategic partnership in discussions reinforcing this antithesis to the anger of local councillors.

Finally, strategic was a discursive genre (Fairclough, 2003) – what community volunteers dismissively called ‘Council speak’. This was starkly illustrated when local authority One worked with outside consultants on a vision statement for a new Community Plan. The report was described at a CPP Board meeting as ‘very aspirational’, ‘off the cuff’ and that it used a ‘fresh, non-bureaucratic style’. The document spoke of aims such as ‘put the smile back on people’s faces’ with actions such as ‘use cheering signage in and around [local authority One] to reinforce key messages’ from an organisation that ‘uses ‘no problem’ and ‘yes, I can’ in its daily vernacular’. A council Director described reading the document as a ‘culture shock’. An NHS manager stated they found it difficult to read as it was so different from a typical strategic Community Planning document. The document had to be actively translated in the meeting by this officer so they could understand it: ‘put the smile back on people’s faces’ was translated into ‘improving mental health and wellbeing’. In doing this, a policy action of making people laugh and smile through amusing, friendly signs, was transformed into a medicalised problem to be



tackled by statutory agencies working ‘to help people use the aspiration we offer them’.

Interpreting “strategic” as a metaphor, a spatial scale and a discourse genre we start to understand it as a cultural domain. These were the meanings officers were either used to understand strategic partnership working, or provided a means for them to read and understand their experiences. This cultural domain becomes important in community engagement and political power when we explore its application to *being* strategic – when the activities of partnership working were carried out.

### **Being strategic in partnership**

In documents, presentations and meetings, partnership working was presented officially as a core activity of statutory agencies. Local authority Two in a report to Council stated: ‘Partnership working is, quite obviously, now a normal part of delivering the Council’s, and its partners’ objectives...’ and local authority One similarly suggested that its Community Plan ‘shows that organisations across [area] are already working in partnership to tackle problems and plan and deliver services.’ As discussed above, from the historic experience of corporate management, these organisations had valid reasons for describing partnership working in this way. However, the reality of partnership working was very different, and definitely not strategic.

Rather than changing partner organisations' strategic priorities, strategic partnership working was actually more commonly presented as the 'scatter-gun' tactical approach of projects otherwise dismissed by strategic managers. In community engagement workshops, local authority One presented the successes of partnership working as one-off projects, ordinarily funded by a Scottish Government funding stream: a fire safety training scheme run by the council and fire and rescue service; a walking club run by the health board and the council. In the community plan of local authority Two a number of large-scale strategic actions were listed, such as rolling-out neighbourhood management across the city, yet these were described as 'agreed project plans'. This preference for joint project working, as opposed to strategic working, was readily acknowledged by officers, who suggested external project funding was the only reason partnerships operated:

'in recent, very recent times maybe over the last year or more, it's [partnership working] become almost by imposition quite high on the agenda and that's because by act of the government they said well if you want Fairer Scotland money it's gonna be through the [CPP] and you know ... it's gone to the partnership you have to act as a partnership. That has meant that there's been an imposed and I think deliberately imposed responsibility of trying

to get the partnership to act more like a  
partnership...'

(Strategic officer, local authority Two)

'in terms of resource what [community regeneration  
fund] done [...] was say well there's the resource  
which is dedicated to the Community Planning  
Partnership you can agree on a set of priorities and  
you can use that money to do it and it works [...]  
it's not always straightforward but it does work it  
brings people together at the *table*'.

(Strategic officer, local authority one; emphasis  
added)

As presented in these quotes strategic partnerships were joint-working around external funding. Observing partnership meetings, it was often the case that without the incentive of external funding, discussion became focused on elaborating what a partnership is or should be; literally reflexive questioning of why they were there in the first place. At a CPP board meeting of local authority Two the Leader rhetorically asked the partners to consider 'what we as Community Planning partners are giving to the process?' and was considering codifying this in a constitution.

The metaphor used by the officer above – partnership as ‘the table’ that people bring things to – provides insight into why strategic partnership working became project working. It is easy to understand why partnerships are seen as tables – they usually meet around them. But the partnership itself is not the table; partnership working as described in policy documents should be a process to achieve better service delivery and outcomes. However, this table metaphor was widely used by strategic officers and it can perhaps be seen as the dining room of the nebulous strategic scale, providing a focus for the various actors. Not only was partnership a table, it was also a table to which people must bring things – to continue the dining metaphor, almost a feast of public services. Some agencies, notably the NHS, brought very little. The absence of their staff from successive meetings was regularly noted; one participant described them as ‘a structurally inept organisation’ because of their failure to work in partnership. When they were at the table of a CPP meeting in local authority Two they were so removed from the everyday activities of the Partnership that it resulted in anger from all partners and raised voices about very basic issues, such as the distribution of papers. It was as though a teenage son had been persuaded finally to sit down at the family dining table. The Police, on the other hand, were the models of partnership working:

‘and we could in that regard [partnership working] take the Police as a model of good practice because if there is a partner organisation that has embraced Community Planning it’s the Police and any Police officer that I’ve ever talked to can articulate Community Planning and the merits of it incredibly eloquently’.

(Strategic officer, local authority Two)

They are the model because they bring resources to the table, in the knowledge they will get support to deliver their services and outcomes. Because of this widely used TABLE metaphor, partnership working becomes a process that must share resources no matter how difficult this is:

‘Community Planning requires buy-in from all the players around the table and that is one of the most difficult things to do because if people were to be honest and put their hands up they’ve got their own agendas and they’re still protecting their own corners and their own agency’s input and all that’

(Strategic officer, local authority Two)

Again, it is understandable why players protected their own corners. Each organisation was working in a very different organisational context with its own priorities, as well as those

of the Community Plan or SOA. They also had increasingly limited budgets and resources to deliver these priorities. As with LSPs '[w]hen representatives of different organisations come together as 'partners', they often behave much the same as they do in their 'day jobs', with interaction characterised more by the clash of competing conventions than the harmony of interdependence and reciprocity.' (Sullivan & Lowndes, 2004: 64) Despite this, partnership working was portrayed as an easy, natural activity of these organisations.

It was also widely acknowledged by officers that the community should be at the heart of partnership working in the Community Planning process:

'well I think that first of all the community should be at the heart of Community Planning and I don't just mean that as a sort of glib statement it's it's real'.

(Strategic officer, local authority Two)

'Interviewer: ... how do you see the community within the Community Planning partnership.

Participant: Their role?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Participant: I see it very clearly I see it as being the  
key role’.

(Strategic officer, local authority One)

And these were definitely not glib statements – these officers knew community engagement could improve public service delivery and wanted to improve their practices. At the end of interviews officers would occasionally turn the questioning onto the researcher and ask if they had advice as to how to make community engagement better.

However, the practices of strategic partnership working regularly structurally excluded community groups. For example, the leader of local authority one CPP asked the CPP board if the priorities in their Single Outcome Agreement published in March 2008 “felt right”: ‘does the document feel right, do the priorities feel right, do the expectations feel appropriate for [local authority One]?’ This was accompanied with expansive hand gestures as though they were bringing this community together in the meeting room. Although this community was being invoked, as with similar agency partnerships dominated by managers (Munro, Roberts et al., 2008), there were only three people at the meeting who were not officers. Many of the officers present commuted in from surrounding local authorities. The invoked community, represented by the CPP Board, legitimised this policy process

as community engagement that met statutory and policy requirements.

The strategic scale did not have space for the local, non-strategic, issues of community activists (for further details of the community voice, see: Matthews, 2012b; Matthews, 2013 in press). An excellent example of this disjuncture between the invoked partnership with communities, and the reality of partnership decision-making was the process regarding regeneration funding in local authority Two. In announcing the Fairer Scotland Fund in November 2007 the Scottish Government required details of how it would be spent to be included within SOAs being produced for March 2008. Local authority One had evaluated all existing regeneration projects and decided which to continue. Local authority Two waited until December 2007 to begin a rushed process. To guide CPPs the Scottish Government had chosen eight priorities that CPPs could select from. With only three months to decide how to allocate resources, officers in local authority Two struggled to evaluate all the existing regeneration projects, let alone effectively engage in strategic partnership working with community groups.

The only attempt at community engagement was an afternoon seminar of discussion workshops held in April 2008. Most attendees were actually officers of statutory agencies or very



large third-sector organisations who could spare the time of their staff, with a few community activists present. In the PowerPoint presentations that began the session it was quickly apparent that the CPP had already decided that a new index of multiple deprivation would decide the allocation of funding, so this could not be influenced. Local partnerships would then disburse this to projects according to priorities chosen by the CPP from the Scottish Government list: early intervention, health inequalities and improving employability.

In discussion groups interpretation problems between the centre and localities emerged. In one group discussion was on the priority of ‘early intervention’. Most participants did not understand whether this meant a focus on children and young people or just trying to prevent all people experiencing poverty. There was also concern that community engagement was not prioritised and community development organisations would lose their funding. Officers from the Health Board were particularly concerned about this as they saw community capacity and confidence building as vital to improving health and wellbeing. They were assured that ‘community engagement was central to everything that was done in [local authority Two]’ so no extra resources would be required. As the discussion progressed the means of allocating funding and the priorities to be tackled were challenged. However, the PowerPoint presentations, and the guided discussion notes,

gave the obvious impression that little could be effectively changed. The seminar was designed to produce agreement around what had already been decided by the CPP.

This engagement seminar took place even though the funding allocation decision had actually been taken by the CPP – a decision that had to be taken the month before for legal and political reasons. The projects that had been notified they were to close *were* community capacity building projects. Early intervention *did* focus on projects working with children and young people. At the CPP meeting to decide these allocations the Health Board were unwilling to sign-off on the report because they had not been given sufficient information; the Director angrily suggested the CPP was making an ‘incompetent decision’.

Two further meetings of the local authority Two CPP took place in June 2008. In the first of these, two letters were tabled, one from a Convener (Chair) of a local partnership complaining about the imposition of funding decisions on them. The officer leading the process responded that ‘imposition is an emotive term’. They added that the Partnership had carried out ‘extensive consultation’, highlighting the engagement seminar on the three chosen criteria and adding that they could not adopt all eight priorities as the Scottish Government would not accept this. The representative from the Chamber of Commerce

sought further clarity asking if projects outwith the three categories would lose funding. The officer only replied that ‘the fund was set up to deliver activities to tackle poverty and disadvantage’ in a manner that could be described as patronising and defensive. Two community activists had chosen to attend the meeting as local projects had lost funding. However the Partnership meetings were not public like other Council committees and so did not accept deputations. After they had sat patiently through the meeting this was explained to them by the Council Leader, leaving the community volunteers visibly extremely angry. The second June meeting had to be organised to make a final decision on the funding allocation. All the same issues regarding the competence of the decision were repeated and community volunteers and representatives of the voluntary sector were extremely angry that communities had been bypassed in the decision-making process. After over an hour of discussion in a hot, stuffy room the decision was finally taken with the reservations of some partnership members noted.

The process that was observed during the fieldwork in making this spending decision was not strategic – local authority Two was hurriedly responding to funding decisions and guidance as they emerged; local authority One had already made the strategic decisions based on forecast possible funding and engaged community groups and partners. The decision by local

authority Two did not demonstrate partnership working. It was made by one division of the local authority and the Council Leader. However, the decision had been made in the settings of strategic partnership working, where ‘Partnership working is, quite obviously, now a normal part of delivering the Council’s, and its partners’ objectives’. Subsequently the process was interpreted by the leader of Council as ‘really good partnership working’ at the end of this final meeting. Other representatives of partners around the table nodded and spoke of their agreement.

## **Conclusion**

Through the thick description presented above the historical antecedents and contingency of strategic partnership have been presented and the daily recreation of these meanings in everyday practice of doing strategic partnership working has been elaborated. Together, in the delivery of public services in these two Scottish CPPs, this was a cultural domain – the strategic domain – by which actors understood their practice and in-turn justified their actions to others. The strategic domain was thus an inductive category. It also had internal validity – like many others in public services these officers spoke of using “strategic” language difficult for others to understand.

The strategic domain, however, did not entirely dominate actors' worldviews. It was not an all-powerful structuring discourse. As similar studies of the New Public Management and governmentality have demonstrated, discourses can be readily challenged or re-made by actors to serve different ends to those intended (McKee, 2008; 2009; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Further, bureaucrats are readily making pragmatic decisions as 'policy entrepreneurs' in a shifting and complex policy environment structured by national policy and guidance (Durose, 2007; 2009).

Importantly for debates around partnership working, the elaboration of the strategic domain presented here highlights the exclusionary nature of strategic partnership working in officers' work. That partnerships struggle to include the community as equal partners has long been recognised (Atkinson, 1999; Collins, 1999; Davies, 2009; Hastings, 1996; 1999; Hastings, McArthur et al., 1996; Sullivan & Lowndes, 2004). As Sullivan and Lowndes (2004: 61) suggest regarding Local Strategic Partnerships, there is an:

'unequal power balance between technically 'equal' representatives: Representatives from business, local government and the community come to partnership working with radically different resources. It is a very real problem for citizens' representatives to get their

voices heard alongside experts and business people who know how to ‘play the game’, possessing superior technical knowledge, confidence and negotiating skills.

The thick description of strategic domain presented here provides further evidence as to why this inequality persists. It is not solely about resources; the discursive and cultural space created by the strategic domain was made by strategic officers. They were comfortable with its genres and carried out the “work” necessary to maintain strategic partnership working as an everyday organisational activity. As previous research on similar partnerships has shown ‘public managers and community activists have contrasting common-sense understandings of partnership which, being unspoken, cannot be articulated or deliberated’ (Davies, 2007: 780). Community activists were embedded within a contrasting local domain of their lived experience (Matthews, 2012a; Matthews, 2012b). When they tried to use the language and mores of the strategic domain they struggled; technical terminology around indices of multiple deprivation, housing management and environmental service provision were spoken of awkwardly. Whereas strategic officers would use the most recent policy terminology from the Scottish Government – the language of outcomes – community activists would often use terminology a decade or more old, which was from the last partnership activity that had a meaningful impact on them (Matthews, 2012a).

Overall, community engagement within the CPPs was severely limited and accountability to communities was minimal – expansive hand gestures over meaningful engagement. These problems with Community Planning have been noted by the recent Christie Commission on public service delivery in Scotland:

‘there are significant variations in the effectiveness of community planning partnerships; and that, for the most part, the process of community planning has focussed on the relationships between organisations, rather than with communities.’

(Christie, 2011: 44)

Taking an interpretive approach to understanding strategic partnership working helps us explain why effectiveness varies. If we accept that the actions of these officers represent a strategic cultural domain, then we can understand and reconcile the genuine desire by the officers to engage communities with the difficult practice of trying to do strategic partnership working. While the strategic domain produced a way to understand and reconstitute an ideal of strategic partnership working, the dissonance with actual practice was great. While the public acting out of partnership and strategy could maintain some of this gap, the reflexivity of the interview situation revealed how alive this gap was to working practice, as officers

questioned their practice and asked the researcher for assistance in making community engagement and partnership working better. After one neighbourhood partnership in Local authority Two a strategic community development manager commented that they wished the community would “look up” to strategic issues. After the researcher challenged them on this a look of what could only be described as enlightenment passed the officer’s face. In their response they had realised that ‘if the council got the little things right then we might start looking at the big picture’.

The Scottish Government’s commitment to Community Planning and reform of public services, particularly the strategic realignment of services to be preventative to meet outcomes, means the strategic domain described above is likely to grow in influence over practice (Christie, 2011). As a response to austerity this is a shift in public investment and management that is taking place across industrialised nations and in the provision of development aid (Mair, Zdeb et al., 2010; Perrin, 2006). The analysis above might suggest that this is a doomed endeavour that will stifle any attempts to engage communities in a “Big Society”, almost supporting the arguments of conservatives that government activity inherently dulls civic entrepreneurialism (Conservative Party, 2009). However, the activities of local authority One in disbursing its Fairer Scotland Fund – taking time to make a strategic decision



including the community – demonstrate that it can work. Overall, the focus for local government internationally should be on getting everyday “tactical” management correct and sufficiently funded to meet need before expecting communities to engage in a strategic domain they do not have time to think about, let alone understand, while they are trying to get basic services to support their communities (Hastings, 2007; Matthews, 2012a)

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